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SUBJECT: DRL VISIT TO NORTHERN IRAQ: CIVIL SOCIETY STRUGGLES FOR  
INDEPENDENCE, HUMAN RIGHTS (#1 OF 2)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Scott Dean, Acting Regional Coordinator, REO  
Kirkuk, DoS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: During a visit by DRL to Northern Iraq, civil society funding recipients said they struggled to maintain independence against strong opposition, and in some cases persecution, from political parties. Media sources said they faced detainment and abuse from government authorities for speaking out. NGO's requested funding and capacity building from training and networking opportunities. End Summary.

Introduction

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¶12. (U) DRL Program Officer Vitessa Del Prete visited Northern Iraq March 24 - 29 to assess DRL grant recipients of over \$100 million in funding to Iraq, a significant portion of which is being spent in the Kurdistan Region on democracy, human rights and women's programs. At the Kirkuk Regional Embassy Office, Del Prete and IPAO led a roundtable with independent non-governmental organizations (NGO's), and met with representatives from the National Democratic Institute (NDI), International War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and ASUDA to discuss program implementation issues.

¶13. (U) This cable is the first of two covering Del Prete's visit to Northern Iraq. The second cable covers programs providing treatment for the mentally ill, legal services for women in jail, and reconciliation to victims of torture and imprisonment under the regime of Saddam Hussayn.

NGO Roundtable Raises Needs and Obstacles

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¶14. (U) Del Prete and IPAO led a roundtable with the Women's Rights and Civil Society Council (WRCSC). The Kurdish Human Rights Watch (KHRW) and representatives of fifteen other NGO's discussed their programmatic needs and the obstacles facing civil society development.

¶15. (SBU) Participants included: Dr. Pary Karadaghi, Director and CEO of KHRW; Amera Hassan, Legal Adviser, KHRW / WAFDI; Venus Shamal, WRCSC and KHRW, Sulaymaniyah; Sabria Ibrahim Najim, Director of Qara Hanjir Women's Center, Kirkuk; Zahra Salih Jassim, Director of Al Mahaba, Kirkuk; Sabria Omar Mahmud, Center for National Dialogue, Kirkuk; Dilven Korel, LAIC, Kirkuk; Muhealdin Ali Hiwa, LAIC, Kirkuk; Banaz Omar, Women's

Rights and Civil Society Council; Gulzar Mazhar, WAFDI; Kwestan Abdul Rahman, New Life Organization for Anfal Women; and Raso Hama Sadi, Human Rights Organization (HRO); Sirwa Shuku, HRO; Sayran Salah, Astera Organization; Sozan Arif, Women's Empowerment Organization (WEO); and Maysun Omar Hussein, FARAH, Kirkuk.

**¶16. (U)** Participants identified funding and networking with other women as the two greatest needs for independent NGO's. They said they were frustrated with the greater attention paid to women from southern provinces of Iraq, who had more opportunities to participate in international programs and conferences.

**¶17. (C)** Sozan Arif of WEO said that NGO's not associated with a political party must network more heavily with the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to get registered. Both KRG's, she said, made it difficult for independent NGO's, and many had to close down. Arif said the parties wanted to control NGO's finances, staffing, and mission objectives. She said that when an NGO registered, there was often pressure to employ staff provided by the MOI. Further, the political parties would attempt to proscribe who received the NGO's assistance.

**¶18. (U)** WRCSC members provide democracy training; basic care to families affected by the Anfal campaign; safe havens to victims of domestic violence; and vocational and literacy training for women. Karadaghi said the KHRW had recently submitted to the Kurdistan National Assembly a proposal for the Personal Status Law that empowered prosecutors to take on cases of abuse or violations of human rights against women.

**¶19. (U)** In a follow-up meeting in Sulaymaniyah with WRCSC member the Islamic Sisterhood Union (ISU), ISU Director Fatma Ali Ahmed highlighted female genital mutilation and honor killings as local customs wrongly attributed to Islam. Ahmed proposed a media campaign educating the public, particularly the poor, about the ill-effects of these traditions and their

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non-compliance with Islam. KHRW Director Dr. Pary Karadaghi suggested the entire network take on the campaign in order to reach a broader audience.

#### Media Facing Lack of Jobs, Human Rights Violations

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**¶10. (U)** Del Prete and IPAO met with DRL funding recipient International War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), a local NGO training Iraqi journalists the standards of international reporting. A trainer with IWPR, Asso Ahmed Hama Salih, said IWPR provided hands-on training to journalists in radio engineering, production, sourcing and reporting. From a class of 20 students selected from throughout Iraq, eight were chosen to produce a 15-minute segment of "The Other Half," a radio show addressing women's issues.

**¶11. (SBU)** Salih and Mariwan Hama-Sayid, a freelance journalist and IWPR trainer, said it was difficult for independent journalists in Iraq. Salih said that as the editor-in-chief of an independent newspaper, he often hired graduates of the IWPR training; however graduates had few other employment alternatives. Most media outlets, he said, were restricted in what they could report by their relationship to the political parties.

**¶12. (SBU)** Mariwan cited the recent Halabja incident, in which a number of journalists remained detained without charges, and the recent conviction of Kamal Sayid Qadir, who was sentenced to 18 months (reduced from 30 years after a retrial) for writing an article critical of the KDP leadership. Mariwan said that both of these incidents further affirmed to him the need for NGO's like IWPR. He said, "Our mission to continue has become a moral necessity."

Comment:

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¶13. (C) This DRL trip helped uncover the extent of political party efforts to dominate independent NGO's and media. Civil society in the Kurdish regions appears to be in the nascent stages and struggling; however there is reason to be optimistic. Motivated individuals within certain sectors appear to be making progress within the larger limits of the current political environment, but would benefit from outside support and resources. End Comment.

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